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ABSTRACT

The U.S. Secretary of Education, Richard W. Riley, addressed the American Institute of Architects on the problem of school safety resulting from building age and/or building code violations. The Secretary stated that the problem is a large national embarrassment and reveals the Clinton Administration's response through new construction bonds and tax credits for holders of these bonds. Mr. Riley indicated that the school construction explosion is beginning and that this affords architects and their colleagues an opportunity to create better and more engaging learning environments. Finally, the Secretary stated that the Administration is seeking new ways to engage Americans in the process of school designs that can be vital centers of the community, and challenges architects to build buildings that not only accommodates the schools' functional needs, but can lift children up towards the information age. (GR)

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Remarks as Prepared for Delivery by
U.S. Secretary of Education Richard W. Riley
American Institute of Architects
Washington, DC

One of the great thrills of serving as the Secretary of Education is that I get to visit schools and talk directly with parents, teachers, and students all over the country. It's a fantastic way to get a sense of what's important in people's lives.

It also offers a lot of moments that fall under the heading: "Kids Say the Darndest Things." I met one of those students last fall --a 5th-grader named Jonathan that President Clinton and I met at a school in Maryland.

Jonathan was asked to read a paragraph of his favorite book to the President --his book was "Eben Tyne, Powdermonkey." It's about a young boy who loads gunpowder onto battleships in the Civil War. Boys who had that job were called "powdermonkeys." Jonathan read his paragraph, and the President responded by talking about how much he loves to read history.

Jonathan sort of hesitated before handing the book to the President and saying, "If you'd like to finish it by yourself, you can. But it's due back at the Crofton library on the 27th of September."

There are millions of Jonathans across America --good kids with sharp minds who are eager to learn. And they want to go to school in a safe, welcoming environment in which to learn and unlock their creativity and potential.

Unfortunately, I have also learned from my travels that too many schools are not safe and welcoming at all. One of the biggest ailments afflicting many of America's schools is that they are crumbling physically. We have a lot of school buildings that simply do not meet code.

I visited one such building just last month --an elementary school in the Watts section of Los Angeles. We arrived first thing in the morning to see the children decked out in their uniforms marching into school. Those kids were ready to get to work.

Next thing you know, the fire alarm goes off. But there wasn't any emergency, and there wasn't any prankster. The culprit for this false alarm was a leaky roof that allowed rain from the previous night's storm to pour in and short out the alarm.

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Our mission is to ensure equal access to education and to promote educational excellence throughout the Nation.

And that's not all. The rain flooded the cafeteria, forcing its closure for several days. The electrical hazards caused by the leaky roof make it impossible to put computers in the classrooms.

With El Nino dumping a ton of rain on southern California this week, who knows what that school and its students are dealing with right now? And if that school was chosen for the Secretary of Education to visit, how bad are America's most rundown school buildings?

We saw a similar instance in Monday's *New York Times*. This principal of a New York City elementary school wears a hard hat to usher kids in and out of the school. You know why? Because in October, he was hit in the head by a shard of glass that fell from a third-story window. The windows in the 83-year-old school are so rotten that they were condemned -- nine years ago.

Ladies and gentlemen, if I sound like a bit of an alarmist, it's because I am alarmed. The number of American schools that are physically worn out is nothing less than a national embarrassment.

Fifteen years ago, a famous report described the academic state of our schools as "A Nation at Risk." In the years since, we have begun to strengthen the academic foundation of our schools. But, the very structural foundations of some schools are rotting. We set new enrollment records every year, and yet we expect too many tired, old buildings to handle the growing load. It's not unheard of to find a school in a state of disrepair just down the road from a state-of-the-art prison.

Comparing the condition of old schools with new prisons reminds me of a statement by Plato: "That which is honored in a country is that which will be cultivated there."

Why do we tolerate such conditions in our schools? I know that the AIA has been asking that question, and I appreciate your support for our school construction initiative last year. Unfortunately, that proposal died for lack of support in Congress.

But the President and Vice President have kept it very much alive. Just this week, they put forth a revised --and larger --school modernization initiative.

The budget President Clinton released on Monday calls for the authorization of almost $22 billion in construction bonds. Under this proposal, the federal government would provide tax credits to holders of the bonds, thereby enabling states and school districts to issue the bonds interest free.

Most of the bonds--$19.4 billion in the next two years--would go for new construction or renovation. The Treasury would allocate the bonding authority--half to the 100 districts with the most low-income children, and half to states to focus support on all districts in need.

The remaining $2.4 billion in credits would go to expand a program created last year --the Qualified Zone Academy Bonds. These credits would cover the interest on bonds dedicated to partnerships that link public schools and businesses --and this could include renovation of school buildings.

The plan is attractive because it provides valuable federal support while maintaining local autonomy --it simply reduces the cost of, and creates incentives to local investment in needed school construction. Further, we think this stimulus can ease overcrowding, make schools safer and get up-to-date technology into our classrooms. That's good for our students and good for your profession.

If Congress supports this $22 billion initiative, we can create a school building boom across America to match our student population boom. In a special session convened last fall to address school overcrowding, the Florida legislature voted to dedicate $2.7 billion to school construction. In Seattle, 70% of the voters approved a bond measure Tuesday after the superintendent presented the public with the choices facing his district --a rain bucket or a laptop computer. Other areas cannot build schools fast enough to keep pace with growth. We will need to build 6,000 new schools in the next ten years.

So this explosion of school construction offers you and your colleagues a grand opportunity to create better and more engaging learning environments. Our children need them badly. That's why I am glad to see pockets of progress that are shaping an exciting and creative time in the design field of educational facilities.

As a grandparent and a school patron, I am fascinated to see how an alternative physical structure can be used to teach principles of geometry or physics --or how a well-trained teacher can revolutionize the classroom experience with state-of-the-art technology.

As a taxpayer, I am gratified to see new schools that incorporate energy-efficient design features and schools that are wired "smart" with the right set of modern conduit and electrical connections.

And, as a concerned citizen, I am inspired to see how schools can link up with local agencies in ways that bring the community into the learning environment. When the school library is also a community library, or the school auditorium is a community theater, the interaction can enrich the school and the community as a whole.

These ideas are slowly being put into practice. The center of an elementary school campus that I visited in St. Louis is a typical prairie pond in the courtyard that can be used for science experiments.

The Henry Ford Academy outside Detroit holds its classes inside the Henry Ford Museum and has access to the vast collection of science and manufacturing artifacts.

Students at rural West Virginia's Roane County High School can learn from the natural environment in the school's barns and greenhouses, or travel to any spot on the globe via Internet access.

I want to stress the importance of technology in particular. We are working hard to support the expanded use of technology in the classroom. The Schools and Libraries Corporation just began accepting applications from schools that want to take advantage of the E-rate --a new part of the Universal Service Fund that gives schools and libraries discounted access to telecommunications. Make sure your schools are applying for the e-rate discount.

All of this activity in the midst of an economy that is running on all cylinders --it's really exciting. The only problem that I can see in any of this is that it these advances are coming in random spots. We want to make the most of the current national focus on modernizing schools needs to spread these effective design innovations as widely as possible.

The Clinton Administration wants to explore with you new ways to engage the American people in the process of designing schools that can be vital centers of the community. I know that many issues that define your work --including energy efficiency and environmental sensitivity in new design, and using technology to engage young people in new ways --these issues are of particular interest to Vice President Gore.

In the days ahead, we hope to develop a creative partnership aimed at making our nation's schools exciting and engaging places of learning as well as centers of community. We need to make schools smaller and more personalized --new schools must be family, student and teacher friendly.

This is a good time for you to foster a dialogue with your education colleagues and citizens back home that goes beyond "bricks and mortar and square footage."

The quality of the classroom space has a profound impact on learning. The Carnegie report, "Building Community," by Ernie Boyer, states "it impacts not only the child's ability to learn, but also the teacher's ability to teach."

This is not an easy process as some of you know --when schools are built or remodeled --people let you know what they think.

My principal in residence last year, Linda Quinn, the principal of Puyallup High School in the state of Washington, told me that former students at her school chained themselves to the school steps for fear that the school's historical entrance, might be altered. School design invokes passion and that's healthy. When Americans aren't passionate about their schools we are in trouble. Engaging citizens in the task of defining what they truly want from their school can strengthen the ties that bind a community together.

Your ability to capture the values and needs of a community in your designs is central to this process.

To that end, I want to close with a challenge, but I will turn to the words of one of your brethren to make my point. I'm sure you all know of Fay Jones --the protégé of Frank Lloyd Wright who is best known as a designer of residences and sacred spaces. This comment captures the attitude that I hope you will bring to every educational project you take on.

Jones said: "We have the potential to build buildings that will not only accommodate our functional needs, but will stand as models for the best of our ideas. We have the power and responsibility to shape new forms in the landscape --physical and spatial forms that will nourish and express that all-important intangible of the human condition at its spiritual best."

That is your charge for the nation's schools. I urge you as designers and builders, to push the envelope in search of new schools designed to excite and lift up the children of the Information Age. I urge you as respected professionals in your communities, to go home and speak out about the physical decay of older schools and the urgent need for modern facilities. If you don't speak out, who will?

Thank you for your interest. I look forward to working with you as we build the kind of schools that will stand as a foundation for America's progress in the next century.

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